

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 454 405

CE 081 912

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TITLE Postmodernism: Yes, No, or Maybe? Myths and Realities No. 15.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, OH.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0013
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: <http://www.ericacve.org/fulltext.asp>.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; *Adult Learning; Critical Theory; *Cultural Pluralism; *Epistemology; Modernism; Objectivity; *Philosophy; *Postmodernism; Power Structure; Realism; Scientific Methodology; World Views
IDENTIFIERS Essentialism; Positivism; Scientism

ABSTRACT

These key features overlap, criss-cross, and reoccur in discussions about postmodernism: plurality of perspectives, antiessentialism, antifoundationalism, antiscientism, and end of metaphysics and ideology. Other characterizations focus on the discrediting of modernism's grand narrative, the positivist assumption that objectivity is the only truth, and that all questions could be answered by a hierarchy of sciences, principles, and beliefs. Discussing the nature of knowledge in adult learning, Kilgore (2001), on the other hand, characterizes postmodernism and critical theory, an overlapping paradigm, in terms of the interplay between knowledge, power, and learning. The merits of postmodernist thought are hotly debated. Some find a self-defeating paradox in the key features of postmodernism. Some disagree with postmodernist views on objective reality and on our ability to know that reality accurately. Others question the quality of some postmodern writing and thought. At the same time that proponents and critics disagree vehemently over epistemology, many agree that postmodernism brings a valuable spotlight on human nature and its role in constructing knowledge. For Kilgore (2001), the most significant contribution of the postmodern worldview is the recognition and theoretical inclusion of the diversity of learners and their individual and collective voices. (Contains 14 references.) (YLB)

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Postmodernism: Yes, No, or Maybe?

A number of theorists and scholars have proclaimed that we now live in a postmodern world—a world better explained by theories and concepts different from those of the modern world dating from the Enlightenment and before. The theories and concepts of postmodernism are widely and prominently applied in adult education. So, how do postmodernists characterize postmodernism? What are the critics' critiques? Do proponents and critics agree on anything?

Characterizing Postmodernism

Discussing postmodernism and continuing education, Leicester (2000) writes that "postmodernism is not a systematic theory or unified movement so much as a loose umbrella term for a perspective" incorporating reactions against "the sovereignty of science, the dominance of 'western traditions' and the assumption of epistemological progress" (p. 73). However, some key features "overlap and criss-cross, appear and disappear in discussions about 'postmodernism' (ibid., p. 74):

- **Plurality of Perspectives.** Multiple perspectives, accounts, and theories are respected. Eclectic thinking, drawing on and synthesizing multiple cultural traditions is encouraged.
- **Antiessentialism.** A text (be it an individual word, a message, a concept, or any significant structure) has no inherent, essential meaning—no "one thing in common that makes us use the same word and which would give us the essence of the concept" (ibid., p. 74); rather, it is open to multiple interpretations.
- **Antifoundationalism.** Truth and knowledge of it are not based on a fixed foundation of objective reality. Instead, truths are located in specific sociocultural contexts, outside of which no vantage point exists.
- **Antiscientism.** In particular, science is rejected as a foundation; the positivist assumptions that science is uniquely objective and value neutral are considered a language game.
- **End of Metaphysics and Ideology.** Antifoundationalism represents the end of metaphysics; if there are no fixed foundations of objective reality for truth and knowledge, there is no longer a concern with the fundamental nature of reality and with the limits and validity of our knowledge about it. Likewise, ideology is at an end—no more "grand narratives" to legitimate and provide a correct interpretation of a wide range of events.

Others focus particularly on the discrediting of modernism's grand narrative, the positivist assumption that objectivity is the only truth, that all questions could be answered by a hierarchy of sciences, principles, and beliefs: "Knowledge was equated with science and science was reality" is the summation found in a postmodern perspective on evidence-based nursing (Marks-Maran 1999, p. 4). That grand narrative was discredited in the 1970s and 1980s, according to a postmodern perspective on home economics history, when society discovered that problems like war, poverty, violence, and drug abuse could be neither explained nor solved by science with its rigid controls, sequential problem solving, and predictable results (Richards 2000).

Discussing the nature of knowledge in adult learning, Kilgore (2001), on the other hand, characterizes postmodernism and critical theory, an overlapping paradigm, in terms of the interplay between knowledge, power, and learning:

Critical theorists view knowledge as the outcome of human interests. Hegemonic truth claims (claims to know that are accepted as common sense) are subject to challenge when they perpetuate...a "maldistribution" of power. Power, from the critical perspective, is possessed by individuals and groups and exerted upon others through oppressive truth claims. Learning, then, is a process of challenging truth claims and arriving at a critical consciousness that these are not universal truths but claims that serve the interests of some at the expense of others.

Postmodern theorists view knowledge as tentative, multifaceted, and not necessarily rationally connected to any motivation or interest. Truth claims are always subject to challenge, and knowledge is always kept in play rather than concluding on a particular emancipatory note. Knowledge is an expression of power, which is ever-present but not omnipotent. Learning is a process of continuous deconstruction of knowledge, of playing with contradictions, and of creatively and productively opening the discourse of a field to an eclectic mosaic of many truths. (pp. 59-60)

Critiquing Postmodernism

The merits of postmodernist thought are hotly debated. Some find a self-defeating paradox in the key features of postmodernism. Some disagree with postmodernist views on objective reality and on our ability to know that reality accurately. Others question the quality of some postmodern writing and thought.

A Self-defeating Paradox

To some, the antifoundationalist claims of postmodern thought do not stand scrutiny. "We are faced with some curious and troubling paradoxes: the claims that there is no truth and that there are no self-evident facts have become truths that we take to be self-evident. The theory that no human theories can accurately match reality is taken by many to be a perfect match with reality. The claim that competing claims are incommensurable is regarded hands-down as superior to any competing claim" (Bachelder 1997, p. 4). Bredo (1997), a teacher educator commenting on recent trends in educational thinking, questions those who—

reach conclusions such as: "All generalization is impossible," or "All knowledge is subjective," or "I'm against all categorization," or "We should be against all norms" or "We should not reach definite conclusions." The paradoxical and self-defeating nature of these assertions sometimes escapes the ardent post-modernist's attention. The more thoughtful post-modernist recognizes that his or her own discourse is paradoxical. It is self-disruptive even as it is disruptive of others. This is a good insight, but it seems to lead to self-defeating behavior, to self-erasure, and to a certain lack of seriousness, because adopting a serious attitude while recognizing that the stance is paradoxical is even more absurd. (p. 10)

Knowing Objective Reality

Many reject out of hand the postmodernist denial of objective reality; a physicist invites those who deny the objective existence of gravity to walk off the balcony of his 21st-floor apartment (Sokal and Bricmont 1998). Equally, many affirm that although various

factors affect how we come to know objective reality, we can in fact know it. For example, Chase (2000) advocates some postmodern perspectives in teaching history to adults but calls a widely quoted postmodernist assertion that the Gulf War did not take place "an example of postmodernism's fury of negation...We can readily recognise the Gulf War as we encountered—and still understand—it as powerfully constructed by media representation of the conflict, just as we recognise that no democracy is perfect. But the hapless relativism to which this tendency in postmodernist thought would seem to lead needs to be confronted, without condemning out of hand all that it has to say" (p. 103). Likewise, "a realist readily grants that all knowledge is constructed, but she is anxious to add that some constructed knowledge is false (for example, the idea that race is a biological category, or that some races are innately superior) while some constructed knowledge is true or at least partially true" (Bachelder 1997, p. 10).

Quality of Writing and Thought

In advocating a postmodern critique of scholarly inquiry, Mourad (1997) describes postmodern thought as often highly and needlessly nuanced, elliptical, and difficult to understand. Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997) acknowledge that "density of expression and the highly intellectual treatment of the subject-matter did create problems of reader accessibility" in an earlier text "that was meant to require interpretive efforts and close reading" and that "there is a certain incongruity in the quest for a text that empowers but which at the same time disempowers through its inaccessibility" (pp. viii-ix). Thomas (1997) notes that postmodernist writers commenting on education rarely explain their use of existing words with new or obscure meanings or of novel metaphors. Finding it sad that "a great deal of postmodernist writing about education does not make easy reading...because it limits the dissemination of worthy postmodern ideas and may distort the way people perceive postmodernist proposals" (n.p.), he provides a glossary.

Less sympathetically, Chase (2000) draws a clear distinction between the objective reality of the facts of history and more subjective interpretations—grand narratives—of those facts; he points out that "no serious historian, certainly none since World War I, believes that history is a grand narrative of progress....Historians' sequencing of selected changes as progress is fraught with difficulties: critical appreciation that this is so long predicated postmodernism" (p. 103). And with no sympathy at all, Sokal and Bricmont (1998) characterize postmodernist "abuse" of the natural sciences as "(1) holding forth at length on scientific theories about which one has, at best, an exceedingly hazy idea... (2) importing concepts from the natural sciences into the humanities or social sciences without giving the slightest conceptual or empirical justification... (3) displaying a superficial erudition by shamelessly throwing around technical terms in a context where they are completely irrelevant... [and] (4) manipulating phrases and sentences that are meaningless" (pp. 4-5).

A Middle Ground

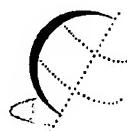
At the same time that proponents and critics disagree vehemently over epistemology, many agree that postmodernism brings a valuable spotlight on human nature and its role in constructing knowledge. Tisdell (1998), an adult educator, tells an illuminating postmodernist story about how her own positionality—her whiteness—informed her view of what was valid or relevant knowledge, to the detriment of an adult black student. Bachelder (1997) finds merit in postmodernism, even though with a modernist caveat: "Postmodernism has given us valuable insights that no inquiry is value-free and that all knowledge is human made, but this is not to say that all knowledge is just made up" (p. 10). Stufflebeam (1998) compares standards-based and postmodernist perspectives on personnel evaluation, in particular the role of value and bias, the social and political context, and the influence of power relationships.

Indeed, postmodernists and modernists share a fundamental, passionately held value—"the ethos of honesty and probity, criticism and analysis, the rooting out of dead dogmas, the constant examining and surpassing of current assumptions and practices in the name of emancipation from dangerous dogmas" (Hollinger 1994, p. 169). Despite the swirling controversy over ontology, epistemology, and methodology, proponents and critics alike seek Truth. Perhaps they differ on the means but not on the end. And what are adult educators to make of all this? For Kilgore (2001), the most significant contribution of the postmodern worldview is the recognition and theoretical inclusion of the diversity of learners and their individual and collective voices.

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This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0013. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. *Myths and Realities* may be freely reproduced and are available at <<http://ericacve.org/fulltext.asp>>.



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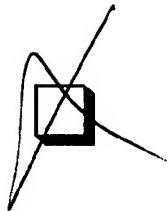


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